DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 217 CS 212 847

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TITLE Back to School: Warnings and Advice to the Older Graduate Student.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Instructional Materials (For Learner) (051) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Students; Doctoral Degrees; English Teacher Education; *Graduate Students; Higher Education; Married Students; *Reentry Students; *Student Attitudes; *Student Educational Objectives; *Student Experience; *Student Motivation; Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS *Student Surveys

ABSTRACT

In a University English Education program, 14 graduate students between the ages of 37 and 50 were asked to talk about the personal, social, academic, and professional advantages and disadvantages of being older graduate students. Disadvantages included financial problems, social isolation, irrelevant course content, and supervision of their teaching by less experienced instructors. Some advantages noted were keeping intellectually alive, fewer social distractions, and greater self-reliance and confidence. At the end of each interview, the students offered some words of wisdom or advice to the older graduate student who might be in his or her place next year. (PRA)

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BACK TO SCHOOL: WARNINGS AND ADVICE TO THE OLDER GRADUATE STUDENT

David Sudol, Anne-Marie Hall

Five years ago we met in a graduate class and discovered we had a lot in common. Not only were we graduate students in the English Education program, but we were married with children and had years of teaching experience. Often we found ourselves talking about concerns of older graduate students--those entering or reentering graduate school at the age of 35 or older, often after 5, 10, or 15 year absences. During our conversations we realized that our concerns were somehow different or distinct from those of younger graduate students--those usually under 30, going straight through, B.A., M.A., Ph.D. We were also surprised to learn that there were quite a few of us in the English department. We decided to survey the concerns of older graduate students from several different programs within the department. Our informants ranged in age from 37 to 50 and have been in graduate school from 2 to 10 years. We asked 14 of them--10 women and 4 men--to talk about the personal, social, academic, and professional advantages and disadvantages of being older graduate students.

Instead of conducting formal interviews, we simply sat down and talked with them, much as we ourselves did five years ago. To maintain the feeling of dialogue, we've decided to present this paper not so much as a formal analysis but as a collection of voices and viewpoints. Together we'll go back and forth discussing the disadvantages and advantages, illustrating our main points with quotations and anecdotes.

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PERSONAL

Disadvantages:

One common concern and a logical place to begin is with the fear that going back to school is a mistake. Several people mentioned they were apprehensive about selling their houses, packing up their families and belongings, and moving halfway across the country. One 41-year-old man said, "It's scary to uproot at this age. I felt a terrible conflict between the desire to settle down and go back to school. I had trouble convincing myself it was the right thing to do."

A related concern--expressed more often than any other--was finances. Many of the people we talked to took large cuts in pay, went into debt for the first time in their lives, and gave up a comfortable lifestyle. One woman, 45, said, "Things are tough. On a reduced income (GAT's stipend), I still have major expenses, including a son in college. My husband and I cashed in our retirement funds. When we figured our taxes recently, we fell below the poverty line." Another woman said, "I'm scared of being in debt. I left a $40,000 a year job. I also grew up on Spam and having the electricity cut off, and I fear a return to that economic lifestyle."

In addition, many felt that universities do little to support older graduate students. As one man commented, "Graduate school is set up for young people. Its assumptions are that the economic needs--the issues of security--are the same for everyone. For example, there is no help for older graduate students' housing or insurance needs. I cannot just move to family housing. I have older children with attachments to schools and neighborhoods. I have no health or car insurance."

Similarly, some complained that they couldn't attend Preceptorship,

Colloquium, receptions, meetings, or lectures in the late afternoon or evening because they couldn't arrange childcare. One woman, 50, said, "Raising four kids was the biggest obstacle to graduate school. There is no understanding in the department of that. They cut no slack for parents."

Several students complained that going back to school seemed demeaning, even embarrassing. More than taking a cut in pay, they were regressing in status from "professional" to "student." One woman stated, "When I went to grad school for the first time at age 21, it was an upward move. After being an undergraduate, it seemed prestigious to be a grad student. At 43, I feel going to grad school is a downward move." A 41-year-old man said, "I'm too old to be playing student." He added that he was tired of his family asking him, "When are you going to get a real job?" One man connected the issues of status and finance in this way: "I've got 20 years of teaching experience for God's sake, and I can't even take care of things. It's personally humiliating not to be able to provide for my family."

Advantages:

The only personal advantage that everyone mentioned was "keeping intellectually alive." We continually heard expressions like these: "My life is in focus now." "This is good for my mind." "Grad school is intellectually stimulating." "The intellectual rigor is great." "I'm on the right track." "I have an intellectual life and am not vegetating in some job." "Right from the start I felt intellectually alive." "It felt good to know I wasn't stagnating." "I've improved my life."

SOCIAL

Disadvantages:

Most of the older grad students we talked to felt separated and

isolated from the younger ones. The older students weren't comfortable attending grad student functions or "hanging out" at the bars--or even free to go. One woman said, "I'd rather be at home with my husband." Another commented, "I went to one picnic to meet grad students and found I wasn't interested in playing volleyball in 104 degree heat." Unfortunately, being apart from the younger students often means being out of touch with what's happening in the program. As one woman remarked, "I'd like to collaborate on research, but it's hard because I don't know what people are working on. I don't go to happy hour, but that's where people often talk about their academic interests." Another said she had to wait until Monday morning each week to talk to members of the grad student softball team to find out all the department news. She complained, "I hate that softball team. Yet it is the main informal networking system in the department."

Some older graduate students felt the younger ones discriminated against them unfairly. As one 40-year-old woman put it, "Ageism is a problem. I am an Other as an older grad student. I have nothing against young people. I like them. It's young people who usually don't care for older people. They often make me feel my concerns are boring or fussy compared to theirs." A 42-year-old woman said, "I feel old in the company of the young. It's funny because you don't age in your mind, only in how others perceive you. Once I tried to explain to a younger grad student that I couldn't go to a late-night party after a poetry reading because I had to pick up my three kids from a basketball game. The response: 'Oh, they can get home by themselves.'"

Of course, all of these points are irrelevant because for many of us with studies, teaching, and families, social life is a meaningless concept--it simply doesn't exist. Lots of people said, "What social life?"

Advantages:

Curiously, the social disadvantages actually become advantages in some cases. No time for a social life, for example, means older graduate students have fewer distractions and can focus on their studies and teaching, or--for those of us with families--pay more attention to spouses and children.

Actually, many older graduate students were pleasantly surprised to find that they weren't alone. As one man said, "I expected to be the only one here over forty, and I'm delighted I'm not." Everyone was pleased with the stimulating intellectual company of fellow older graduate students. One woman stated, "Camaraderie is there if you seek it out." However, she added, "It won't come to you as easily as an older graduate student. Plus, one has to choose friends carefully because there is not much time for personal relationships."

ACADEMIC

Disadvantages:

Several students believed they were initially at an academic disadvantage. They complained of being "rusty." One woman said, "I hadn't read Shakespeare in 20 years." Another man joked, "I never heard of deconstruction; I thought it had something to do demolition." Yet another woman said, "It's hard to apply myself intellectually when I hear ontolological, epistemological, and reify all in one sentence. I find myself gazing out a window for ten minutes." In sum, they felt they had fallen far behind and were apprehensive about catching up.

Furthermore, a few students expressed the fear that their professors wouldn't take them as seriously, perhaps because they had been away from

academia too long or were not on traditional career paths. A woman confided, "One professor talked to me about how much work there would be and suggested that I not stay in the class." Another woman said, "I feel I am not taken as seriously by some of the faculty because I'm not sure I will use my Ph.D. to seek a tenure-track position in another university."

A nagging concern of older graduate students is a sense of urgency. Because they usually don't have years to spend on a long and leisurely graduate career, they want to get out fast. One woman labeled it the "hurry-up syndrome" and complained that "it violates the spirit of being a student: seeking knowledge."

Likewise, many complained about "worthless degree requirements" and "irrelevant course content." Several pointed to the department's anachronistic foreign language requirement. One man said, "At 40 I need to be writing my dissertation, not studying Spanish." Several students with extensive teaching experience questioned the pedagogical relevance of their course work. One student--a woman with twenty years of community college experience--said, "I have been in the classroom for so long that I struggle with the relevance of much of the theory. At best, there are tenuous connections between the theory-laden content of many courses and the practical world of teaching."

Advantages:

A number of older graduate students said they were better focused in their studies. One man spoke for many in saying, "I know exactly what I want to do, and I do it." We often heard comments like these: "I'm here to write fiction." "I want a Ph.D. in Native American literature, with a minor in women's studies." "I knew when I started that my dissertation would be on

Coleridge, and I've been reading and preparing for that ever since." At this stage in life, older graduate students are less willing to dawdle or take detours.

Consequently, these are students with the confidence to take control and plan their programs. One woman said, "I write my own ticket. I won't hesitate to drop worthless courses, do independent study, and request credit for outside projects." Another remarked, "I refuse to suffer fools or do busywork." Yet another said, "I have years of independent work habits already developed, and I don't need to be overdirected." This self-reliance is especially handy at the dissertation stage when, as this woman noted, "you tell them what to do."

Quite a few students thought they were at an advantage because of their mental maturity. One man said, "Although I can't learn foreign languages as well, I grasp theoretical concepts much better." A woman observed, "Twenty years ago I tended to memorize theory. Since then I've had so much teaching and practical experience--so much life--to associate with the theory that it's become easier to understand." Another woman stated, "When I was young, I got a degree but not an education. Today I find myself more ready to truly enter the world of ideas. I'm calmer and more able to really think."

In their classes, older graduate students are often more involved, eager to speak up, even to challenge their professors. This can at times turn into a disadvantage because older students tend to dominate discussions. One man said, "I've been teaching so long I naturally play the role of discussion leader." Several joked that they had to consciously remind themselves "to shut up and let someone else have a turn." More seriously, one

woman felt that professors weren't sure how to treat older students. She said, "They seemed confused. The hierarchy was disrupted, as if they were asking, 'Are these people to train or to learn from?'" The majority, however, did not express this concern. The more common feeling was put best when one woman said, "I feel closer in terms of age, seriousness, and intellectual curiosity to my professors than to my fellow students." Most older graduate students believed their professors respected them.

PROFESSIONAL

Disadvantages:

Several people complained that their teaching experience and expertise were ignored, devalued, or discredited. Amazingly, they found themselves lumped in a teacher-training program with 22-year-olds who had never taught a day in their lives. Moreover, they were required to teach standardized curricula designed for first-year teachers. A former high school teacher said, "I had been teaching for fifteen years, and no one ever told me what I could or couldn't do. I resented being controlled." One woman with extensive community college experience said, "I'm insulted to have to justify my syllabus and grades. I'm embarrassed to be supervised by someone so much younger and less experienced than I am--someone who dropped out of a Ph.D. program. I hate wasting hours in Preceptorship arguing about how to handle late papers." In addition, because the composition program's philosophy is radically different from hers, she initially lost confidence in herself as a teacher. Ultimately, she said, "I had to rely on my student evaluations to convince me I wasn't wrong and to restore my confidence."

A truly nervewracking professional disadvantage is fear of not finding

a job. Everyone we talked to expressed concern about being perceived as "too old to go on the job market." One woman said, "I'm afraid my shorter career might be less attractive than a candidate with a full working life." One man wondered, "Will anyone be willing to hire a 45-year-old Ph.D.?" Married graduate students felt an additional disadvantage because they have to find two jobs in the same vicinity. As one woman put it, "Will he have to sacrifice for me, or I for him? Can we pull off a career move that benefits us both?" Echoing a personal concern, several students talked about their fear of starting over--selling the house, packing up family and belongings once again.

Finally, a number of students questioned the "value" of a graduate education. They expressed disillusionment with the profession and tended to be philosophical. They asked questions like these: "Does marking one more comma splice really matter?" "Will I ever be anything more than a glorified secretary?" "Is teaching composition important to the rest of the world?" "Why have I spent my entire 30's getting to the starting gate?" "Will I ever be compensated for the cost of a Ph.D.?" "Was it worth spending 10 years to get only a stamp of approval and a starting salary of $27,000?" "Is finishing the Ph.D. really more important than the happiness and well-being of my family?" Echoing Peggy Lee, they wanted to know, "Is that all there is?"

Advantages:

Even with the composition program's restrictions, experienced grad students felt they had an advantage in their teaching. One man remarked, "Teaching is my life. It's the easiest part of my graduate work." A woman stated, "First and foremost, I define myself as a teacher. It's who I am and

what I've been doing all my adult life." These older GAT's believed their students respected them and viewed them as experts or "authority figures." Consequently, they rarely had to deal with discipline problems or grade appeals--frequent concerns of many younger GAT's. Although some older grad students initially worried about balancing their teaching and studies, most said they could devote more time to their course work because, as one man put it, "the teaching is no big deal."

Finally, older graduate students said they were ready to join the profession. They were eager to start their professional lives and go beyond mere academic requirements. They frequently wrote articles for publication and presented papers at conferences. One 40-year-old woman said she took on a project like Works in Progress, in which she organized a series of graduate student readings and published the papers in a journal, because she had the "experience, confidence, and maturity to do it." Currently, she's organizing New Directions in Critical Theory, a graduate student conference. When asked why, she said, "I want to give something to the younger graduate students." She also confessed to a "maternal urge to counsel and help them." In fact, all the people we talked to agreed their professional initiative was due to age and maturity. As one woman put it, "When I was younger I was too shy and timid. I believed my voice unworthy. Now I'm not afraid."

WORDS OF WISDOM AND ADVICE

We concluded our interviews by asking each person to offer some words of wisdom or advice to the older graduate student who might be in his or her place next year. We'd like to close with a survey of their responses.

"Sit down with a good guidance counselor or a person who can really listen and help you dovetail your interests and career goals with the faculty

and the college and the facilities to meet your needs. An arranged marriage has its advantages: more positives and less chance for failure."

"Think about the consequences of entering a Ph.D. program. Are there jobs? What are those jobs? Is this what you want to do? Do you realize once you start where it ends up? The farther you get in the program, the narrower your options may become."

"Don't overreach at first. Your capacities are different, and your old work habits may not work. The turf has changed. Listen and watch. It's going to be different from what you expected."

"Have a plan and stick to it. Don't expect to fit into any image of what a grad student should be or do."

"This is your chance to not know everything. So take advantage of it. Go to learn and not to teach or impress."

"Realize you already know a lot. It will give you a huge edge. You need to have confidence as an older graduate student."

"Enjoy grad school while you're doing it. I call it the process vs. product approach. If you're not enjoying what you're doing day by day, then get out. Don't wait for the product--being a professor--to fulfill you because it won't be that different and odds are it'll be harder."

"Take one thing at a time in steps toward graduation. Don't get overwhelmed by prelims, language requirements, etc. Proceed slowly and knock off one thing at a time. If you want to be out in "x" number of years, or work in a small school, those factors will help you tailor your program to your personal goals."

"Do it; it can be done and really rewarding. Look for supportive people to work with and don't suffer fools."

"It's a chance to rise to the top and be hugely successful. Do it and enjoy it. It's professionally rewarding."

"Humility and humor--the only way to go through grad school again as an older student."

"Check your lottery numbers every Thursday and Sunday."